

# Request for City Council Committee Action From the Department of Public Works

**Date:** April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013

**To:** Honorable Sandra Colvin Roy, Chair Transportation & Public Works Committee

Subject: Comments on the Environmental Assessment for the Northern Lights

**Express Passenger Rail Project.** 

#### Recommendation:

Approve the staff recommended comments on the EA for the Northern Lights Express (NLX) project and direct the Public Works Department to submit the comments to Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT).

#### **Previous Directives:**

 January 22<sub>nd</sub>, 2008: Authorize city officials to enter into the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance Joint Powers Agreement.

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## Approved by:

Steven A. Kotke, P.E., City Engineer, Director of Public Works

**Presenters:** Donald Pflaum, Transportation Planner 673-2129

Reviews:

Permanent Review Committee (PRC): Not Applicable Civil Rights Affirmative Action Plan: Not Applicable Policy Review Group (PRG): Not Applicable

### **Financial Impact:**

Action is within current department budget

# **Community Impact:**

Neighborhood Notification: A public open house for the project occurred April 4, 2013.

City Goals: Supports City Transportation Goals

Comprehensive Plan: Supports Comprehensive Plan Goals

Zoning Code: NA

# **Background/Supporting Information**

#### Background

The proposed Northern Lights Express (NLX) project restores passenger rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth, which was discontinued in 1986. Passenger trains would share tracks with existing BNSF freight trains similar to how the Northstar Corridor operates. Much of the estimated \$820 million capital cost would be needed for track improvement, new track sidings, and for right-of-way acquisition. The 155-mile long project would include stations at the Interchange in Minneapolis, the Foley Station in Coon Rapids, Cambridge, MN, Hinckley, MN, Superior, WI, and Duluth, MN. 8 trains per day in each direction would operate with an estimated ridership of 938,000 annual riders (2,569 riders per day). Train speeds throughout the corridor will vary from 30 mph to 110 mph in some segments. Estimated travel time from the Minneapolis Interchange to the Duluth Depot would be 2 hours and 17 minutes. Federal funding has been secured to complete the environmental assessment process and to work on preliminary engineering tasks.

## **Environmental Assessment**

The Environmental Assessment (EA) document for the proposed Northern Lights Express (NLX) Passenger Rail project was prepared by MnDOT in collaboration with the Wisconsin DOT and the Joint Powers Alliance and was approved by the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA). MnDOT released this document on March 18, 2013 and a public open house to solicit comments was held in Cambridge, MN on April 4, 2013. Public comments are due on April 17, 2013. Comments will be turned into MnDOT on April 17<sup>th</sup> contingent on Council Approval on April 26<sup>th</sup>, 2013. The FRA will determine whether an EIS is required or if the project will receive a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) based upon the results of the EA. Once the environmental assessment process has been completed, the project will move into the preliminary design phase. Preliminary engineering will provide more detail on infrastructure improvements, grade crossings, stations, layover facilities, and a maintenance facility. Further refinements on projected ridership, costs, and travel time will be forthcoming.

Preliminary engineering is expected to take an additional 2 years upon which time the Joint Powers Board will turn the project over to MNDOT for final design and construction.

A number of alternatives for the NLX alignment were examined as part of the EA process. It was determined that Route #9 (the BNSF alignment) is the most direct and cost effective option.

In terms of the environmental concerns and consequences the following topics were evaluated as part of the EA document:

- Right-of-way acquisition
- Land use compatibility
- Water resources/wetlands
- Air quality
- Noise and vibration
- Hazardous waste/contaminated soils
- Farmlands impacted
- Wildlife impacts
- Visual impacts
- Social and economic impacts
- Environmental justice
- Indirect impacts

As the project progresses, necessary mitigation will need to be identified and addressed. The majority of topics above had identified areas of concern outside of the City of Minneapolis.

# **Recommended Comments**

Below is a summary of the specific City of Minneapolis EA comments. Detailed comments are included in Attachment #1:

- The City of Minneapolis supports the Route #9 alignment of the NLX project.
- The City of Minneapolis does not support an operations and maintenance facility within the city.
- The project will need to secure needed stormwater and erosion control permits.
- More clarity needs to be provided by the project with regard to extra track work needed in NE Minneapolis.
- More clarity needs to be provided by the project with regard to the Interchange platform. It is uncertain whether an extended platform will result in modifications to the Cedar Lake Trail. If the Cedar Lake Trail needs to be relocated, the project must pay for any costs to do so. Impacts to the Cedar Lake Trail during construction of the NLX line must also be minimized.
- Noise and vibration impacts to nearby properties must be further assessed.

Attachment #1 - EA Comments

Cc: CM Lilligren – NLX Board Member CM Quincy – NLX Board Alternate